

The Changing face of Trade Union Politics

It is widely accepted that we live in a world of change and that change is inevitable. It is to be expected that change within organizations would come about as a result of engagement of the membership, and where the leadership and executive of the organization understands the importance of communication and the need to speak with one voice. It becomes questionable when it appears that there is open division and disunity within any organization; and the washing of dirty linen in public becomes the end result. When this occurs, it strongly suggests that the organization has serious problems which need to be addressed.

It can hardly be expected that any organization will function effectively, if it is troubled by apparent dissent, charges of mistrust, lack of confidence in the leadership and accusations of blatant disrespect being shown on all sides. Trade unions like other organizations are known to practice and adhere to democratic principles. With this being the case, the membership has to decipher and determine what is acceptable behaviour that guides the organization; starting with the membership itself and extending to the executive leadership and management.

When it was founded, the trade union was not built on a platform of the promotion of organized teams canvassing against each other for election to office. The new approach to trade union elections that sees the use of the mass media and social media, is a revolutionary approach that will take some getting accustomed to. To some, it might appear that there is a move away from the promotion of unity of purpose to that of self-interest. Whilst the jury is out on this, it is to be expected that the members of the older generation would express support for the long established practice, where the membership undertook to choose the members of the leadership team without the involvement of the general public.

Whilst the new approach may be disconcerting to some, it matters most that those vying for office refrain from smear campaigns which are devoid of personal attacks and the denigration of individuals. It is unfortunate, as it now appears, that trade union election campaigning is seemingly taking on the character of what is common place in a national general election. What conclusion can the public draw? Is it the training ground for those who have aspirations on entering national politics?

It becomes a matter of interest when some of those who are team members in an elections are prepared to move away from a leader whose leadership style and actions in their opinion are questionable. On the other hand, the membership and public may be left to judge, what is accounting for the jumping of a team member from one team to another after an elected term of office. This is the political intrigue and drama which is normally associated with partisan politics rather than trade union elections.

The Changing face of Trade Union Politics: 05 April 2019: Dennis de Peiza, Labour Relations Consultant, Regional Management Services Inc.

Based on the trend where there is a high level of campaign promotional materials on display, it would seem that there are grounds to make a legitimate query about campaign financing. If it is that those vying for office attach such significance to their success at the polls, is it reasonable to assume that they are entitled to make the necessary outreach to the electorate? Full colour printed flyers come at a cost and so are email blast. Should we in the future expect to see paid newspaper advertisements and paid radio broadcasts appearing?

It is rather disturbing to comprehend how a productive working relationship can be established at the executive level, after individuals from separate teams are elected to office in the leadership of a trade union. Is it possible for these teams with their separate agendas to find common ground in carrying forward the business of representing the interest and welfare of the membership, after the epic battles they fought in the public domain?

It is amazing that the loyalty of individuals to the trade union over that of a political party, the maintaining of confidential information as it relates to trade union business, open division amongst members at the executive and a lack of respect for others are amongst the issues which are thrown in the public domain. This presents an ugly picture which is being painted of the trade union, and as such, the responsibility rests with the membership to take action to arrest further degeneration that is likely. Division and or polarization within the leadership of a trade union cuts against the grain of what the trade union stands for.

It seems dishonest and nothing more than a facade when those union leaders who condemn each other in public, take to locking hands and lustily sing the union song, echoing the words: "Solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong." How can this be, when there is an obvious show of disrespect of one to another? If this hypocritical behaviour continues, it is quite possible that it can be a deterrent to maintaining existing membership and attracting new members.